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## Development as a Driver of Conflict in Grand Ethiopia Renaissance Dam Crisis

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### **Abstract**

This study argues that although development can be a catalyst for a country's economic growth and political consolidation, on the other hand, development can be harmful and can lead to unimaginable crises. Recent trends in the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) undertaken by the Ethiopian government have affected peaceful relations and conflict dynamics amongst the riparian states of the Nile River. The gap that this research tends to bridge in the existing literature is premised on the fact that

development projects have the possibility of causing harm to their intended beneficiaries. The overall objective of this paper is to contribute to the body of knowledge available on the GERD project, while promoting peaceful inter-state relations. This study is a qualitative research, which was developed using published documentary sources. This research relied on information gathered from secondary sources: journals, book chapters, online newspapers, and so on. The theoretical framework used in this research is anchored on the idea of development as an impasse. This theory argues that development not only does well, it can also cause harm. A key finding of this study highlights that the GERD project has heightened tension and has resulted in the involvement of international actors such as Russia, the US, the European Union, the African Union, the Arab League, and so on, with divergent interests, which have further complicated negotiations and the path to peace. The study emphasizes the urgent need for a win-win peace approach, which will favor all eleven riparian states of the Nile River. Finally, there is a need for joint research by all riparian countries, which will recommend measures on how the Nile River can be used optimally by the riparian states

**Keywords:** *Conflict, Nile River, GERD, Development & Africa*

## Introduction

In the spirit of Pan-Africanism and the need to strengthen the notion of African solution to African problems; the Ethiopian government, in a bid to salvage its deteriorating economy and improve its legitimacy at home, initiated the 2010 development plan, which was geared towards growing and transforming its economy (Wuilbercq 2014). That development plan formed the bedrock for national transformation and it included the construction of a gigantic dam known as the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) (Wuilbercq 2014; Yibeltal 2024), which, when completed, would not only generate 6,000 megawatts, serving about 60% of Ethiopia's population, but would equally become Africa's largest hydroelectric dam project (BBC 2023; Woldemariam & Donnellon-May 2024). Unfortunately, since the commencement of this gigantic project in 2011, the Ethiopian government has been at loggerheads with the downstream countries of Egypt and Sudan. This is because the project changed the relations among the riparian states of the Nile River Basin. Thus it could be argued that the GERD project, with its generated international crisis, gives credence to a school of thought that sees development as an impasse, hence harmful.

Consequently, this article argues that the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), a development project started by the Ethiopian government in 2011 (Wuilbercq 2014; Yibeltal 2024), has created strong domestic conflict dynamics not only in Ethiopia—due to development-induced displacement caused by the construction and other social and environmental impacts (Lori 2013)—but also has generated international conflict situation among the Nile riparian states, especially Sudan, Egypt, and Ethiopia (Jungudo 2023; Woldemariam & Donnellon-May 2024).

This study is divided into sections. First, it will present a literature review that will define key terms such as development and development projects. This is followed by methodology and theoretical framework sections. The next part will present GERD, focusing on the origin and meaning. This is followed by the findings and discussion on the internal and external conflicts associated with the GERD project, especially the escalating regional tension among the Nile riparian states of Egypt, Sudan, and Ethiopia. The last sections presented the conclusion and recommendations of the study.

## **Literature Review**

The GERD project has generated a lot of debates among scholars, critics, analysts, and think tanks. A simple prompt on leading academic platforms such as Google Scholar, JSTOR, and Research Gate will bring out numerous works written by experts on this topic. Consequently, this study will contribute to the existing body of literature available on the GERD issue. The study is significant because it will equally contribute to the growing discussions on development as a driver of conflict, tension and crisis. Therefore, for the sake of this article, we shall be analyzing a few of these articles in this section.

Caruso (2022) in his article titled “Ethiopia’s Grand Renaissance Dam: The Law, History, Politics, and Geopolitics behind Africa’s Largest Hydropower Project” chronicled the origin of the Nile River agreement, dating back to the colonial era (Caruso 2022: p. 3). This study went further to examine and analyze the key challenge hindering the successful completion of the GERD project due to indifference between Egypt and the Ethiopian government (Caruso 2022). The article concludes by outlining workable solutions that will help in averting a future confrontation.

The work by Veilleux (2013), titled “The Human Security Dimensions of Dam Development: The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance

Dam,” examined the impasse associated with the ongoing diplomatic row between Egypt and Ethiopia from the perspective of posing a security threat to the citizens of both countries. Notable among the impact identified in the study is the number of displaced individuals that were uprooted from their homes and rendered homeless due to the project. This work further laid out strategies for both warring parties to maximize the benefits of the dam (Veilleux 2013).

Twafik (2015) in his working paper titled “Revisiting hydro-hegemony from a benefit-sharing perspective: The case of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam,” outlined the opportunities and challenges associated with the GERD project. However, irrespective of this, the author was very optimistic about a benefit-sharing deal that favors all parties involved. Abdelhaleem and Helal (2015) laid emphasis on the impact of the GERD project on different water usages in Upper Egypt. Among these is the quota of water flowing from the Nile into Egypt.

## **Methodology**

This study made use of the qualitative research method. Queirós et al. (2017) cited in Sunday (2023) argued that qualitative research is concerned with gaining a deeper understanding of a given problem and exploring aspects of reality that cannot be quantified by numerical representations. As a research strategy, qualitative analysis "usually emphasizes words rather than quantification in the collection and analysis of data" (Bryman 2012 cited in Soyland 2020 p. 17). The aim of the qualitative research method is to help researchers comprehend the social world through the lens of the interpretation of the world by its participants (Bryman 2012 cited in Soyland 2020).

The study relied on secondary data sourced from open sources such as scholarly articles, online newspapers, and official reports from international bodies and government reports. Thus, a content analysis approach was utilized to identify and classify works relevant to the research questions. Amongst the questions include is GERD a source of conflict? And is this gigantic GERD project causing harm? Data collection involved searching and selecting relevant sources from open-source databases, with emphasis on credibility and relevance to the research objectives. The collected data was then synthesized and summarized to develop the findings presented in the study.

## Theoretical Framework

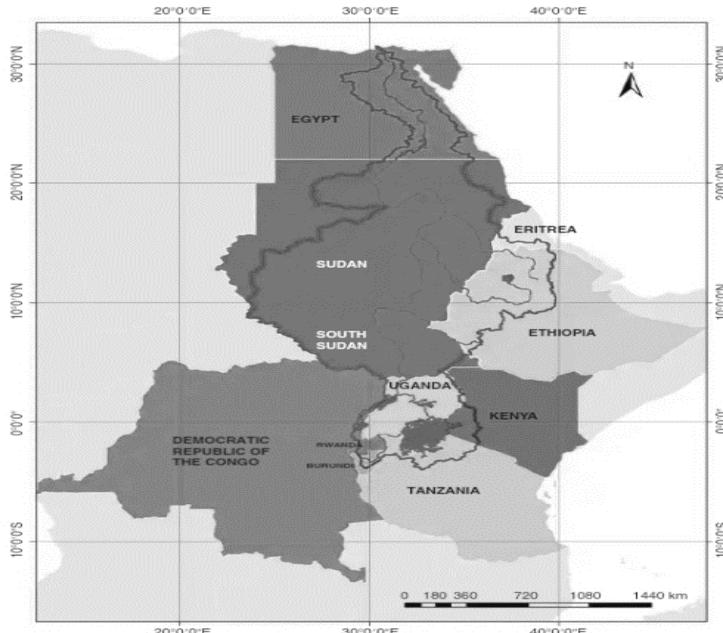
Development has no universally acceptable definition. However, for the sake of this study, we adopted from the schools of thought outlined by Stern and Ojendal (2010). The first school of thought views development as state-centric and as "a key strategy for state-building in the post-colonial societies in which there was an urgent need for both economic growth and political consolidation" (Simon 1999 in Stern and Ojendal 2010 p.11). The Ethiopian citizens and government have come to see the Nile River as a key to its economic emancipation (Witte 2013; Wuilbercq 2014). Thus, there is a need to maximize the benefits accruing from the Nile River as one of its tributary countries (see Figure 1; Mumbi & Fengting 2020). In lieu of this, the Ethiopian government under Meles Zenawi in 2010 launched a five-year development plan aimed towards the growth and transformation of its economy. Underpinning this plan was the GERD (Wuilbercq 2014).

The second school of thought sees development as an impasse. This is based on the notion that development has been ineffective in solving human problems. Instead of helping humanity, it appears to be "harmful" (Stern & Ojendal 2010 p. 12). Thus, "the supposedly desired state of development did not appear desirable" (Stern & Ojendal 2010, p. 12). In lieu of this, the Ethiopian government's ambition to construct a dam has been seen by other riparian states of Egypt and Sudan as harmful to her and threatens her economic survival. Not only that, some Ethiopian citizens have viewed this project as harmful to their existence. This is as a result of the forceful displacement and other social and environmental impacts (Lori 2013) occasioned by the construction of the dam. This has led to internal and external condemnation of Ethiopia's poor handling of the projects' environmental impact assessment and regional row it generated with other riparian states.

Development projects are "central to international development" (Heeks & Stanforth 2014 p.15). A development project can be defined as an "organized means seeking to achieve specific development impacts" (Heeks & Stanforth 2014 p. 15) aimed at improving the social, environmental and economic well-being of individuals, communities, or nations. It could also span through sectors such as health, agriculture, energy and education, among others. Such projects play a vital role in fostering sustainable growth and development, reducing inequalities,

and enhancing quality of life. With poor electricity generation capacity, which has affected more than half of its population, the Ethiopian government hopes that the GERD project, when completed will generate about 6,000 megawatts (Woldemariam & Donnellon-May 2024), which will serve not only its citizens but also other riparian states. Thus, the Ethiopian government, through this development project, aims to become a 'powerhouse' in the African energy sector. This project also aims to boost other critical sectors like agricultural field by supplying water to Ethiopian farmers during drought seasons characterized by poor rainfall.

**Figure 1:** Map showing the Nile River and her tributaries countries.



Source: Mumbi & Fengting (2020 p.1480).

### Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD)

Prior to this project, the Ethiopian citizens and government have resented how the Nile River favored Egypt and Sudan largely, even when Ethiopia contributes about "59-68 percent of the water flow to the Nile River basin" (Veilleux 2013 p.4; Tawfik 2015, p.2) as a Blue Nile state. Historically, the treaties covering how the Nile water would be used dates back to the colonial era. The first of such treaty in 1929, was

between Egypt, which at that time, was a semi-independent nation and the British colonial government over the Nile River Basin (Caruso 2022, p.3). Among the issues agreed upon between the colonial power (Britain) and the semi-independent Egyptian government was the recognition of Egypt's rights (natural and historical) to use the waters of the Nile (Caruso 2022). The 1929 treaty equally gave Egypt a 'veto power' to veto any construction projects, such as dams in the Nile's upstream countries (Caruso 2022, p.3). Although, during this period, Ethiopia was not under any colonial power, yet she was not invited to participate in this treaty.

The second of such treaties, signed in 1959, was known as the 'Agreement for the Full Utilisation of the Nile Waters' (Caruso 2022 p. 3). The 1959 agreement further consolidated the 1929 agreement by allocating "the waters of the Nile solely to the downstream states of Egypt and Sudan and denied the rights of the upstream states (Ethiopia and others) to use it for their development" (John 2020 in Jungudo 2023 p. 170). In furtherance of this, an eight-page bilateral agreement was signed between Egypt and Sudan, where 55.5 and 18.5 billion cubic meters of water were to be shared, respectively amongst them (Caruso 2022). Caruso (2022 p. 4) revealed that the 1959 treaty agreed that:

1. If it should become necessary to hold negotiations with other riparian states, Egypt and Sudan would agree on a "unified view", and
2. If such negotiations were to be permit another riparian state an amount of the Nile water, that amount would be deducted from the shares of the two countries in equal parts.

Just like the first treaty, the water needs of the other nine riparian states were not taken into consideration in the second treaty (Caruso 2022 p. 4). These treaties (1929 and 1959) have been a significant barrier to the effective use of Nile water (Veilleux 2013 p. 4; Caruso 2022 p. 3; Jungudo 2023) by the eleven Nile states that have gained independence today.

As a result of decolonisation and the need to develop a nascent economy, Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, and other riparian states started to disagree with Egypt due to the latter's hegemony over the Nile water (Caruso 2022 p. 4). There was a growing debate in the 1960s and 1970s which centered around the question of "how newly independent states were bound by agreements that had been signed by their

colonial powers, which had different interests and objectives from theirs"? (Caruso 2022 p. 4). As a result of this, two theories emerged - clean-state and universal succession (Kimenyi and Mbaku 2015 in Caruso 2022). According to the theory of universal succession, "any rights and obligations acquired by a ruler in the performance of his public duties were expected to continue to bind the state even after a regime change" (Caruso 2022 p. 4), while the clean-state theory states that "law is an expression of sovereign will and therefore, only the successor state can determine what the nature of the new legal regime will be" (Caruso 2022 p. 4).

Egypt has argued using the universal succession theory by asserting that the colonial treaty of 1929 and that of 1959 were legally binding on all countries of the Nile River basin. Egypt has over the years threatened to use military force on any country that attempts to deprive her of the use of the Nile water. This sentiment was echoed in 1978 by Egypt's former leader, Anwar Sadat, who opined that "we depend upon the Nile 100 per cent in our life, so if anyone, at any moment, thinks to deprive us of our life, we shall never hesitate because it is a matter of life and death" (Waterbury 1979, Al Jazeera 2013, Oestigaard 2016 in Caruso 2022 p.5). However, Ethiopia, which has frowned at the 1929 and 1959 treaties and is leaning towards the clean-state doctrine, developed a more nuanced approach to state succession known as the developmental approach - "all agreements that no longer serve the development needs of the sovereign state can be questioned" (Caruso 2022 p.5).

All the Nile River states, with the exception of Eritrea, created the Nile Basin Initiative in 1999 with the aim of "fostering cooperation among the Nile riparian states, especially bringing together the interests of both the upstream and downstream states in the Nile Basin" (Veilleux 2013; Caruso 2022; Jungudo 2023, p. 170). This initiative was able to draft the Cooperative Framework Agreement (CFA) with the "aim of establishing a permanent legal and institutional framework for cooperation among the Nile Basin States" (Veilleux 2013; Caruso 2022 p. 6; Jungudo 2023). Egypt and Sudan failed to sign the CFA document on the basis that the "new agreement should not affect their prior rights" (Caruso 2022 p. 6). This increasing tension took a new twist when Ethiopia announced the construction of GERD "with no prior consultation with Egypt, which considers the dam an existential threat to its water, food, and environmental security" (Caruso 2022 p. 6).

The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) was a 'brainchild' of Ethiopian former authoritarian ruler Meles Zenawi, who laid the foundation of the project in 2011 (Wuilbercq 2014; Yibeltal 2024; Tawfik 2015 p. 9; Abdelhaleem & Helal 2015). This project formed the basis of Ethiopia's 2010 development plan, which aimed to grow and transform its economy (Wuilbercq 2014). When completed, the dam would be Africa's biggest hydroelectric dam project, with more than 6,000 megawatts of generating capacity, serving about sixty percent (60%) of Ethiopia's population (BBC 2023; Woldemariam & Donnellon-May 2024). Without foreign assistance, the project, financed by the Ethiopian government through internally generated revenue as a result of the sales of bonds and public donations by Ethiopians at home and abroad, is estimated to cost more than 4.2 billion dollars (Veilleux 2013; BBC 2023; Jungudo 2023). GERD, which is located less than twenty kilometers from the Sudanese borders, has a surface area that is the size of Greater London and will be able to contain an estimated sixty billion cubic meters of water (Veilleux 2013; BBC 2023). This capacity is twice the current capacity of Ethiopia's largest lake, Lake Tana, which also doubles as a source of the Blue Nile (Veilleux 2013). The reservoir, when completed, "will have a five-kilometer buffer zone to mitigate the risk of an increase in malaria" (Veilleux 2013 p. 6).

As a result of this gigantic GERD project, other developmental activities that the Ethiopian government outlined that will be connected to it include the construction of roads, bridges, electricity grids and the expansion of towns, among others (Veilleux 2013). In its efforts to become a regional power in the energy sector, the Ethiopian government, through its Electric Power Company (EEPCO)—the organization responsible for administering Ethiopia's hydro power generating facilities—has signed energy contracts with Kenya, Sudan, South Sudan, and Djibouti regarding the sales of electricity (Veilleux 2013) thereby giving the project a strong international outlook. In this regard, the Ethiopian government has signed a bilateral agreement with a Chinese firm to construct "transmission lines to convey the electricity" (Veilleux 2013 p. 6).

Since 2012, international attention has turned towards the Nile River basin, which has generated widespread local, national, regional, and international media coverage (Veilleux 2013 p. 4). Dam construction has both pros and cons. Regarding the GERD project, scholars such as Veilleux, Jungudo, and Caruso have weighed the negative and positive

impacts of this project. After completion, the dam is estimated to generate about 6,000 megawatts of electricity to augment Ethiopia's current generating capacity (Veilleux 2013; Caruso 2022; Jungudo 2023; Woldemariam & Donnellon-May 2024; Tawfik 2015). The dam, after completion, is expected to boost the livelihood of the inhabitants of the Nile riparian states. The interest of the riparian states is strong in the project and that can be seen in the signing of energy contracts between Ethiopia and other riparian states such as Sudan, South Sudan, and Kenya (Veilleux 2013). The project is expected to boost infrastructural development in Ethiopia, such as the construction of roads, bridges, electricity grids, and the expansion of towns, among others (Veilleux 2013). Equally, when completed, the GERD project would mitigate the impact of drought, especially on downstream states of Egypt and Sudan, as a result of joint management. It will reduce the salinity of the Nile water and mitigate the spread of malaria through the creation of a buffer zone (Veilleux 2013). With the capacity to employ more than twelve thousand workers, this project serves as a source of temporary employment (Veilleux 2013). However, just like other dam projects, the GERD has its own downsides.

This project has displaced not less than 20,000 Ethiopians from their villages (Veilleux 2013). Those displaced engage in hunting, subsistence farming, and fishing and rely on the water for economic purposes and other essential needs. As a result of this displacement, the local economy, center of people's culture, identity, and social life remained highly impacted (Veilleux 2013). Thus, the local people's environment and social life tend to change, due to the project. Equally important to note is the fact that the dam project might encourage other riparian states of the Nile river basin (especially the upstream states) to embark on similar development projects, which might impact the annual flow of the Nile waters, thereby negatively impacting the downstream states. As per a study carried out in the 1950s by the United States Bureau of Reclamation Survey, the Blue Nile has the "potential to provide about 10,000 megawatts of hydropower" (Veilleux 2013 p. 6). The dam project can serve as a future military and strategic target. In 2021, during the Ethiopia civil conflict, the latter's military foiled a plan by the Tigray rebels to target the GERD (Caruso 2022). As a result of these and others, the GERD project, as we shall present in the next section, has created domestic and international conflict dynamics.

## **Findings and Discussions**

The GERD project has created multiple levels of impact. While some are positive, others were negative. However, the project created an environment for the eruption of a number of development driven crisis. Over time, the crisis has intensified regional tensions between Egypt, Sudan, and Ethiopia. However, Caruso (2022) has aptly argued that Ethiopia, Sudan, and Egypt are no longer the protagonists of the GERD crisis but rather the project has metamorphosed into a multi-layered geopolitical crisis due to the interest of regional and external actors. Unfortunately, the major grey areas in the GERD crisis as outlined by scholars such as Veilleux (2013), Abdelhaleem and Helal (2015), Caruso (2022), and Jungudo (2023) have been summarized as follows:

- i. The number of years it will take to fill the dam reservoirs is still uncertain and Ethiopia unilateral filling of the dam reservoirs without proper consultation with parties to the crisis remains problematic;
- ii. Annual replenishment plan, quantity of water allocation and management of water in the case of drought is not clearly stated;
- iii. The dam affecting is the amount of water flow into Egypt. This has the potential to affect agricultural activities in Egypt through frequent drought;
- iv. Decrease in Sudan electricity production capacity;
- v. Failure by Egypt to ratify the CFA document drafted by the Nile Basin Initiative that could have established the Nile River Commission and created a path to peace;
- vi. Poor social, economic and environmental impacts assessment report;
- vii. Inadequate mechanisms for settlement of future problems; and
- viii. Egypt stance on other riparian states except Sudan to honour the 1929 and 1959 treaties.

The GERD crisis has led to a diplomatic row between Egypt, Ethiopia, and Sudan. Both countries have accused each other of sabotage. Both regional and international mediation efforts to assuage the situation have proved abortive. The European Union, Arab League, United Nations, African Union, US, World Bank (Caruso 2022; Jungudo 2023), and others have tried to proffer a diplomatic solution to the GERD crisis, yet most of their resolutions seem to be a mirage. One thing to note is that the involvement of regional and international actors

in the GERD crisis tells much about the multi-layered dimensions of the situation. As a result of this, there is an increase in regional security tensions around the Nile River. The unstable sociopolitical and economic environment of the Horn of Africa has made the GERD crisis a daunting task. Equally, with Sudan's fragile political climate, the latter has sought to realign with Cairo on the GERD crisis. The situation is worsened by the fact that its contested border with Ethiopia took a new twist in 2020 (Caruso 2022).

Going forward, the GERD crisis has led to the propping up of proxy regimes and regional as well as international realignment. In order to assert its interests and undermine the Ethiopian government, Cairo has aligned itself with Somalia, providing arms to the latter. In a move to counter this, Addis Ababa has sought to establish a cordial relationship with Somaliland - a disputed region in Somalia. Addis Ababa has entered into water diplomatic relations with Somaliland, which would see it recognize the latter as an independent state. This has led to accusations and counter-accusations among the two belligerent groups. Equally, Sudan has realigned its interests with Cairo. In 2021, Cairo and Khartoum signed a military pact and have since been seen to have carried out joint military operations (air, land, and sea) between the borders of Sudan and Ethiopia (Caruso 2022; Jungudo 2023). Egypt has sought the backing of the Arab League and has strengthened relations with Uganda and Congo by providing financial and technical assistance in the construction of their dams (Caruso 2022; Jungudo 2023). To counter this, Ethiopia has courted the United Arab Emirates to undermine Egypt's influence of using the Arab League to its favor, while aligning with China to provide funds for other critical infrastructural developments (Veilleux 2013; Caruso 2022).

The ongoing GERD crisis has led to increased support of rebel groups. In 2021, two years into the civil conflict between the Ethiopian government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), the Ethiopian government accused Khartoum of providing a safe haven for the members of the TPLF rebels and providing a safe passage for them to target GERD through the Sudan-Ethiopia border (Caruso, 2022). The GERD crisis has worsened as the protagonists and actors on the crisis now include not only Egypt, Ethiopia, and Sudan but also regional players like Congo and Uganda, and international actors like the U.S., China, Gulf countries, and the Arab League, among others. This has transformed the crisis into a "multi-layered geopolitical crisis where a plethora of actors and dynamics have been influencing the

ongoing negotiations" (Caruso 2022 p. 2). The GERD crisis has also led to crackdowns on dissidents both in Egypt (The New Arab 2021) and Ethiopia.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The GERD crisis has its roots on colonialism and its attendant impact on independent African states. However, with decolonisation and the need for African countries to grow and develop economically, there was a need to tap the natural resources within the reach of states. GERD was to herald Ethiopia's hope for rapid economic development and transformation in nation building. The study revealed that in doing this, the upstream states, especially Ethiopia, has leaned towards the principle of absolute territorial sovereignty - unlimited use of the Nile River with little or no regard for the downstream states' water needs. While the downstream states have favored the absolute territorial integrity principle - entitlement to the natural flow of waters crossing its borders. It should be noted that irrespective of the principle of unlimited territorial sovereignty - equal rights to use waters of international rivers without harming other riparian states - advanced by the UN on the use of Non-Navigational Watercourses, the GERD crisis has gone unabated.

The GERD development project gives credence to one of Stern and Ojendal's schools of thought, which sees development as state-centric and a crisis driver. However, the lingering GERD crisis, with its growing conflict dynamics, speaks more of another school which sees development as an impasse, thereby causing harm. Therefore, it is pertinent to note that GERD is a good example of a development project that has sparked conflict dynamics. However, it is germane to state that not all development projects do affect conflict dynamics. This crisis is a time bomb waiting to explode if it is not resolved, especially considering the strength of the alignment and realignment.

Therefore, there is a need to adopt a win-win approach to the GERD crisis. The identity principle can be adopted by the parties involved to solve this collective goods problem. Instead of relying solely on self-interest, parties involved should work collectively to find ways to mitigate the challenges posed by the GERD project. In furthering the spirit of Pan-Africanism and the need to give credence to the notion that African countries can solve their problems without involving external actors, there is a need to establish a body that

comprises all eleven riparian states of the Nile River for increased dialogue, which will de-escalate the currently mutual hurting stalemate and alliances for strategic advantages by each actor. This body, will serve as a place where all members will have equal rights. They shall be mandated with the duty of ensuring the equitable use of the Nile River Basin between the upstream and downstream countries. Thus, joint research by the countries should be carried out if the need arises, and early warning signs should be coordinated to inform countries when there could be a drought or flood.

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